
Abstract: This article deals with the symbolism of the One Ring, basic point in *The Lord of the Rings*, by J. R.R. Tolkien. From the dialogue with Saint Augustine, through the categories of iniancy and free-will, and Paul Ricoeur, through the categories of myth and symbol, the One Ring is understood as lust for power over men, lands, and knowledge. In this sense, Tolkien’s historical reality and his Augustinian view favor an analysis of the symbol’s three functions, proposed by Ricoeur: the cosmic, oneiric, and poetic functions.

Key Words: Symbol, Free Will, Power.

Three rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
nine for mortal Men doomed to die,
one for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
in the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
in the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.

1. *The Lord of the Rings*

To understand the symbol of the One Ring,¹ in the book *The Lord of the Rings*, as an expression of power and evil, it is necessary to start from Saint Augustine’s perspective,² where free will and the original sin gain fundamental proportions in the interpretation of the symbol.

Understood in Paul Ricoeur’s³ theory as an image that has the power of discovering and revealing the bond between the intelligible man and what he considers to be the sacred⁴ unknown, the symbol has three functions (cosmic, oneiric, and poetic) that define it as an integrator of what is known and the totalizing mystery of life.

From the comprehension of a re-staging of sin, aiming at determining the moment of passage from fallibility to error, from the potentiality of evil to the act, Paul Ricoeur provides an interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* set in his Augustinian matrix, yet following the steps of his hermeneutics,⁵ of the sym-

bol as a philosophical speculation, of the myth as a descriptive narrative of the beginning of the existence of something and, finally, the primary symbol, as an image expressed in itself.

By beginning with a symbolism already there we give ourselves something to think about; but at the same time we introduce a radical contingency into our discourse. First there are symbols; I encounter them, I find them; they are like the innate ideas of the old philosophy. Why are they such? Why are they? This is cultural contingency, introduced into discourse. Moreover, I do not know them all; my field of investigation is oriented, and because it is oriented it is limited. By what is oriented? Not only by my own situation in the universe of symbols, but, paradoxically, by the historical, geographical, cultural origin of the philosophical question itself (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 19).

Hence, from the perspective of the dialogue between Saint Augustine and Paul Ricoeur, we present John Ronald Reuel Tolkien’s letters⁶ as primary sources of the author’s own interpretation of his work.

The author’s work can be described through two major aspects: on the one hand, the children writings, the fairy tales, that Tolkien always studied through the English culture, in rural legends, and poems of Anglo-Saxon⁷, Welsh, and Nordic languages, and also from researches on mythology, with its cosmogonic processes, their heroic sagas of conquest and destruction of evil, wars and divine and transcendental beings.

In the twenties and thirties of 20th century, in the meantime between his duties as a professor of Philology, Linguistics, and Medieval Literature at the universities of Leeds and Oxford, Tolkien writes a series of fairy-tales for children, especially for his children, among which is included *The Hobbit*,⁸ published in England in 1937.

On the other hand, the mythology book he had begun in 1917, *The Book of Lost Tales*,⁹ had enough material to be printed. However, thanks to the success of *The Hobbit* among the infantile/juvenile public, the Allen & Unwin Publishing House asks for a sequence of the fairy-tale. Thus appears *The Lord of the Rings* as a synthesis between Tolkien's two great literary lines. *The Lord of the Rings* is a fairy-tale that seeks the ambience of the highest mythological truth.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, a work by the Englishman John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, written between 1936 and 1949, and published for the first time in 1955, the saga of the One Ring is described as a definition of a chimerical world, the Middle-Earth, devastated by a great tyrant with superhuman power, Sauron, who seeks to achieve complete domain over every free people still resisting his empire.

In this world of swords and magic, demons and supernatural beings, the ambience evokes an imaginary Middle Ages, where the kings' lineages are claimed as a communitarian and political authority, in which the relation of work and nature stands in the search for harmony, in which respect and reverence to creation are placed before the creatures' finiteness, and knowledge itself is linked to an associative-kind of wisdom between knowing and being.

The narrative spreads throughout six books, that present a whole natural geography, descriptions of various peoples with their own cultures and knowledges, a complex economy involving production, commerce, and manufacturing of food, weapons, machines, and even creatures. There is a struggle between two large fronts: on one side, the free peoples of the Middle-Earth, the so-called children of Iluvatar,¹⁰ the sole God, Elves, Humans of innumerable tribes, and other peoples that keep the dignity of freedom, Dwarves, Hobbits, Ents and the Wizards sent to protect these peoples; and, on the other side, the Lord of the Rings, Sauron, who keeps under his domain, by corruption or coercion, Men, Orcs, Trolls, Balrogs, and the dreadful Specters of the Ring, fallen kings serving Sauron's power.

The story of the One Ring begins 1,421 years¹¹ prior to the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. Before

Sauron, there was another Lord of the Dark in the Middle-Earth, Morgoth, a great Valar, one of the first created by Iluvatar, and with great power. The story of Morgoth is told in *The Silmarillion*, a book posthumously published, in 1977, yet initiated in 1917, even before the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Morgoth rebels against Iluvatar and is exiled to the Middle-Earth, where he begins a war against the other Valars, the children of Iluvatar and the other free peoples. Besides the Valars, there are also the Maiars, beings also much beyond human understanding, both in power and wisdom, but smaller than the Valars, whom they serve. Sauron is a Maiar from Morgoth, like the Balrogs, the greatest of them all, who fell along with Morgoth in their arrogance.

After Morgoth's destruction, Sauron makes an alliance with the free peoples and establishes a cordial relation with the victorious, offering alliances and services in forge techniques, construction and wisdom. Very skilled, he gains the trust of the Human kings, the Dwarves lords, and the Elves wises. And he offers his knowledge to the Noldor Elves, who forge several rings of power. In his fortress, Sauron also secretly forges his One Ring, the most powerful one, capable of controlling any of the rings made by the Elves. When the One Ring is finally ready, Sauron tries to impose his will upon the Elves, who perceive and hide their rings. Yet, Sauron attacks and manages to control some rings, giving them as gifts to nine Human kings and seven Dwarves lords. The rings of power confer authority and strength to all those who wear them, transforming their authority and strength into obedience and dependency.

Once the plot is discovered, having every king fallen under Sauron's domain, the Dwarves, corrupted in their purposes, although free from direct obedience to Sauron, the wise Elves only, still completely whole in their will, the still free Human kings and the Elves in their glory face Sauron for the first time and succeed to defeat him, when Isildur, son of Elendil, from the free Men, managed to cut out Sauron's hand, where he bore the One Ring.

This first battle against Sauron happens more than 3,000 years prior to what is described in *The Lord of the Rings*. And the narrative is precisely Sauron's reappearance, since the One Ring had not been destroyed, but lost, and hidden for millenniums. With Sauron's return, organized in the East, the free peoples reorganize themselves and a whole new saga is put to trial, and this time for good, for they are at the closure of an era.

2. Plato and Augustine

Once understood both the stories of the work and the One Ring, it is now necessary to investigate the pressing philosophical presence of Saint Augustine in literature, mainly in the symbolic constitution of the One Ring. In *The Lord of the Rings*, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien entirely works the concepts of free will and original sin through the symbol of the One Ring.

Before this, there is a passage in Plato¹² that refers to the capacity of the One Ring, which originally was to make his bearer invisible, and to seduction for evil and power. In *Republic*, Socrates dialogues with Glaucus about justice, and Glaucus affirms that justice is only social convention, appearances, and not the expression of something internal to man himself:

This they affirm to be the origin and nature of justice; – it is a mean or compromise, between the best of all, which is to do injustice and not be punished, and the worst of all, which is to suffer injustice without the power of retaliation; and justice, being at a middle point between the two, is tolerated not as a good, but as the lesser evil, and honored by reason of the inability of men to do injustice. For no man who is worthy to be called a man would ever submit to such an agreement if he were able to resist; he would be mad if he did. Such is the received account, Socrates, of the nature and origin of justice.

Now that those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust will best appear if we imagine something of this kind: having given both to the just and the unjust power to do what they will, let us watch and see whither desire will lead them; then we shall discover in the very act the just and unjust man to be proceeding along the same road, following their interest, which all natures deem to be their good, and are only diverted into the path of justice by the force of law. The liberty which we are supposing may be most completely given to them in the form of such a power as is said to have been possessed by Gyges the ancestor of Croesus the Lydian. According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and reascended. Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn

the collet of the ring inside his hand, when instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result – when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court; where as soon as he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom.

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. (Plato, 2001, pp. 45-47)

In Tolkien's narrative, the One Ring is found, after Sauron's first defeat, in the book *The Hobbit* (1937), prior to *The Lord of the Rings*. Here we find a discussion about the decisions of the Ring bearer. Hobbit Bilbo Baggins, uncle of Frodo, the protagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, finds the One Ring, lost by Gollum,¹³ the creature that had preserved it. And it is precisely in the difference between them that Tolkien shows his disagreement towards Glaucus, in *Republic*, although using a story similar to Gyges, the Lydian.

Bilbo had found the One Ring, and Gollum knew it. They were both in a cave, facing each other. Gollum's intention was to grab the One Ring, become invisible and kill Bilbo. Nevertheless, Bilbo keeps the One Ring thanks to a riddle challenge and, being invisible, he has the possibility of killing Gollum, which he chooses not to do. Thence the first statement of free will brought by Tolkien.

In this matter, besides the origin of the symbolic image present in the Plato's *Republic* - the golden ring that has the power of turning his carrier invisible -, we will also approach the myth it represents, that is, the forge of the One Ring has precisely to do with the voluntary control of the will. Tolkien himself affirms that Sauron's power as the supreme tyrant of the Middle-Earth and Lord of the Dark, the Eye-that-sees-it-all,

is in the creation of the One Ring, and it is much more related to the desire of control instilled in it.

From the Platonic discussion on justice, Tolkien clearly expresses such symbolic image of the One Ring as power. Sauron's expansion lies precisely in its capacity of seduction and corruption. All those who fell under Sauron's domain, despite the objectiveness of the One Ring's corrupting force, wished, by an act of free will, to possess this power.

In a letter to one of his editors, by the end of 1951, Tolkien explicits the meaning behind the refusal of the One Ring:

A moral of the whole (after the primary symbolism of the Ring, as the will to mere power, seeking to make itself objective by physical force and mechanism, and so also inevitably by lies) is the obvious one that without the high and noble the simple and vulgar is utterly mean; and without the simple and ordinary the noble and heroic is meaningless (Tolkien, 2006, p. 156).

In another moment, when answering to a study group on *The Lord of the Rings*, in a letter dated October 14, 1958, Tolkien affirms the question of mythic as symbolic, that is, the conception of the explanation of the original story of something, whether being of life, of sacred, or even of power, referring to a specific image. In sum, the One Ring:

[We cannot demand much from the One Ring, since it is obviously a mythic attribute, although the world of stories is conceived in more or less historical terms. Sauron's Ring is just one of the several mythic treatments of someone's life or power placed in some external object, which thus becomes exposed to capture or destruction with disastrous results to himself. Was I to philosophize such myth, or at least Sauron's Ring, I would say that it was a mythic way of representing the truth that potency (or perhaps, better said, potentiality), if it is to be exerted and produce results, must be exteriorized and, hence, so to say, gets out of the individual's direct control, in some extent. A man that wishes to exert 'power' must have subordinates others than himself. But then he depends on them.]¹⁴ (Tolkien, 2006, p. 266).

So the question of the One Ring's symbolism as the will for power or domination is clear. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the question of this will. As we have seen in Plato's excerpt, Glaucon declares that no man is capable of being just by his own will. Hence, Tolkien despises such idea when placing the differences between the just and the unjust man in the ring of Gyges, the Lydian. Between Bilbo and Gollum, described in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien claims that it is indeed possible to understand how will can be

important to someone who wears the One Ring, or symbolically the power.

For Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* is a Catholic work. Deepening such statement we tried to comprehend what it means to be a Catholic work,¹⁵ better still, which Catholic philosophy¹⁶ is present in Tolkien's understanding. A philosophy of will is fundamentally expressed by Saint Augustine, who is Tolkien's great intellectual interlocutor in *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter to a Jesuit friend, dated December 2nd, 1953, Tolkien affirms that the work is based on religious thought:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (Tolkien, 2006, p. 167)

Here Tolkien clearly states his symbolic and mythical reference. In the speculation that he claims to be Catholic, Tolkien presents another level of interpretation of his work. As such, the Augustinian philosophy becomes necessary to the comprehension of these statements. For Tolkien, truth was not only possible to be presented in a work of art, but was also indispensable for his literary creation, in which he claimed it was a sub-creation,¹⁷ since the whole creation was before his eyes, to the glory of the only creator, God. Thus, truth is the beginning and the end of every work of art worthy of its name.

For Augustine, free will is a central element in the relationship with God. Besides, only by free will can man relate to God. Only through the possibility of denial there is affirmation and, ultimately, faith and love towards Supreme Good. In this sense, free will itself is a gift from God, and precisely because he offers the opportunity of loving, he also enables the denial of such love, thus the origin of evil, and so, the will of domination and power regarding other wills. Augustine declares in his *The Free will*:

[Actually, if man is a certain good, and could not behave virtuously except when he wanted it, he had to have free will, without which he could not behave virtuously. Actually, by the fact that one sins also through it, it must not be assumed that this was why God granted it for. So, there is enough reason for it to be given, since without it man cannot live virtuously. Now, that for this it was granted can even be known from this side, that if someone uses it to sin the punishment from God will fall upon it. It would be unfair that this would be, in case free will had been given not only for a honest living, but

also to sin. Actually, how would it be fairly inflicted punishment to whoever used will to such purpose to which it was granted? Now, when God punishes who sins, what else does he seem to be telling you but this: Why did you not use your free will for the purpose I gave it to you, that is, to act honestly? On the other hand, how would such kindness exist, since the same justice is ennobled when condemning sins and dignifying good deeds, if man was deprived of free will? As a matter of fact, what was not done by will would be neither sin nor good deed. Thus, if man had not free will, both punishment and prize would be unfair. Now, in no way could there not be justice, both in penalty and reward, for this is one of the goods proceeding from God. Therefore, God should give free will to man".] (Augustine, 1986, p. 80)

Here Saint Augustine justifies the existence of Evil in terms of its anthropological origin. Evil is the fruit of man's sin in choosing, by free will, to be attached to created things in detriment of the Supreme Good. In Augustine's philosophy, the term *iniancy*,¹⁸ as eager desire, is neutral, and evil is precisely in understanding such iniancy towards something one knows that can be lost. Thence the need of dominating and imposing one's will in order to acquire, by any means, such object of his iniancy. Now, the only good one knows he cannot lose is Supreme Good itself, love above any doubt, because it is placed in eternity.

Thus, God is the only good in which the iniancy is possible of being redeemed. So, the idea of original sin clearly shows itself as an impediment for the encounter with God, but this encounter is mankind's only salvation, which is possible thanks to the grace of free will, which is also neutral in itself, because it supposes a choice, both to continue in sin and to the effort of loving God above all things:

[As to the spirit, we accuse him of sin when we discover that he, leaving all higher goods, prefers the lower ones, to enjoy them. For this reason, what need is there to investigate the origin of the impulse through which the will withdraws from the incommutable good to the mutable good, when we recognize that it is from nowhere but from the spirit and is voluntary, and for this same reason culpable? And thus, everything benefic to be learned in this matter, having disapproved and repressed such impulse, will be for us to direct our will towards the fruition of the eternal good, deviating it from the fall into temporal goods".] (Augustine, 1986, p. 168)

In that discussion, the One Ring as a symbol of power, and this power expressed in iniancy for the domain of land, men, and knowledge,¹⁹ is radically the symbol of Evil., What Tolkien defines here as the symbolism of power is clearly expressed in a power that corrupts, squanders, and destroys. Evil, after all.

3. A Ring and the three levels of Symbol

Understanding the configuration of the One Ring symbolism as Evil and desire for power, we deepen the analysis in the narrative itself following Paul Ricoeur's vision on the three levels of symbol: cosmic, oneiric, and poetic. For such, we have chosen the initial poem, three scenes in which the temptation of the One Ring is placed for characters that were not corrupted then, and precisely fall into its servitude, and finally the scene of destruction of the One Ring, as the inexistence of the Lord of the Ring.

For Ricoeur, the language of confession, proper for the re-staging of the evil act with the purpose of reviewing it and comprehending it, is basic both for the philosophical speculation and the mythic narrative, because it is the comprehension of evil that favors a perception of man's dependence to the sacred.

It is, in fact, because Evil is supreme, the crucial experience of the sacred that the threat of the dissolution of the bond between man and the sacred makes us most intensely aware of man's dependence on the powers of the sacred. (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 6)

So, retaking the narrative, three scenes are presented as basic points for the comprehension of the symbol's three levels. In the cosmic dimension, the symbol is connected to nature itself, to the conceptions of landscapes, of the structuring of forces that shape the world. The symbol is external because it evokes a group of forces of nature, in which contemplation is fundamentally of grandiosity.

Man first reads the sacred on the world, on some elements or aspects of the world, on the heavens, on the sun and moon, on the waters and vegetation. Spoken symbolism thus refers back to manifestation of the sacred, to hierophanies, where the sacred is shown in a fragment of the cosmos, which, in return, loses its concrete limits, gets charged with innumerable meanings, integrates and unifies the greatest possible number of the sectors of anthropocosmic experience. (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 10-11)

Next, the symbol's oneiric dimension is present not only in dreams while sleeping, but also in deliriums, desires, and planes the individual accesses, stimulates, and relates to. Dreams engender energies, and it is precisely this psychic motion that makes them as a symbolic dimension. From the relationship with the world, the individual who dreams establishes his own relationship, recreating the world in his wonderings, not contemplating the world and perceiving another meaning of it, but creating instead his own world from the lived experiences and realities.

It is function of symbols as surveyor's staff and guide for "becoming oneself" that must be united with and not opposed to the "cosmic" function of symbols as it is expressed in the hierophanies described by the phenomenology of religion. Cosmos and Psyche are two poles of the same "expressivity"; I express myself in expressing the world; I explore my own sacrality in deciphering that of the world. (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 13)

Finally, the symbol's poetic function, expressed in the imagination that presents itself as the primary description of the symbol, its language construction that, as the core for the rising element, shows poetry as symbolic revealer. The symbol's presence is in the revelation of something one still does not know, it is the basic novelty of the description of mystery.

Unlike the two other modalities of symbols, hierophanic and oneiric, the poetic symbol shows us expressivity in its nascent state. In poetry the symbol is caught at the moment when it is a welling up of language. (Ricoeur, 1967, pp. 13-14)

Having defined the three symbolic levels proposed, the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* offers us three scenes in which the temptation of the One Ring favors the dialogue in which we perceive the pertinence of this symbol of Power and Evil. The initial poem is precisely where the cruelest reality of the One Ring is expressed.

Three rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
nine for mortal Men doomed to die,
one for the dark Lord on his dark throne
in the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them,
in the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.
(Tolkien, 2001, p. 7)

Although, as described above, Sauron has guided the Elves to forge more rings to the free peoples, as alliance and generosity, the poem of the One Ring already shows its more central characteristic, bondage. The One Ring is forged to enforce bondage, to dominate wills, lands, and knowledge. In the first four verses the wills are presented initially as equals: Elves, Dwarves, Men and the Lord of the Dark.

However, in the four final verses, it is of no interest what peoples will receive the rings, nor even the apparent gift of the rings of power themselves. They are all frauds so that the One Ring may tempt them, rule them, find them and, in the darkness, imprison them. There is a defined land, Mordor, the One Ring is finally denominated, it is the One, the first and the only one, it is the totalizer. The land of Mordor, where the

shadows lie, that is, all those who became servants of the One Ring, is repeated, as a reinforcement that the One Ring already has an eternal dwelling place.

These inscriptions are marked in the One Ring itself. Gandalf, the Grey, one of the protagonist Wizards of the narrative, shows them to Hobbit Frodo Baggins, by the time his uncle Bilbo delivers him the One Ring. The inscriptions are: *One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them*.

In this poetic dimension, the One Ring's forge itself, its inscription revealing its identity, is a part of its symbolic expressiveness. To forge the One Ring is to poeticize it. To carry its power is to deliver a destiny registered in itself. The dark poem of the One Ring expresses its domination power through the word.

For the , oneiric and cosmic levels we present three scenes that show the interaction between those two levels, namely regarding the temptation offered by the One Ring, its seduction in deceiving the power imposed to those who fear it and admire it.

For such, three moments of *The Lord of the Rings* narrative are analyzed. In all three scenes a character from the novel is strongly tempted to possess the One Ring, even suffering the consequences of his action. First, they all look for a common good, confronting Sauron, the Lord of Dark.

Here the One Ring's symbolism is expressed through iniancy, as previously described, whether it is of men, lands, or knowledge. The lust for power that conditions evil establishes the temptation of bondage to the One Ring. For Ricoeur, the synthesis of permanence in evil, although free will acts, is through the concept of "servile will".²⁰ And it is precisely such concept we will observe in these three scenes.

To understand the journey of *The Lord of the Rings* is to understand the saga of several free peoples facing a great enemy, who is at the verge of total domination. There are warfronts in several points, all led by Sauron, in the lands of Mordor, under the command of Orcs, Trolls, Balrogs, and bought or deceived Men that are against the free peoples: Men, Elves, and Dwarves. Other peoples enter these great fronts, like the Ents and the Hobbits.

The One Ring is Sauron's great lost weapon, and it is in the possession of the free peoples. Yet, no other will can claim the One Ring, because it would be dominated by Sauron, besides revealing the whereabouts of the One Ring to the Lord of Mordor. There is a special group of wizards, beings of great powers and wisdom, who came to the Middle-Earth sent by the Valars to help the free peoples.

The first scene brings a meeting between Saruman, the White, leader of the wizard council, and Gandalf, the Grey, the protagonist that found the One Ring among the Hobbits and that struggles to protect them and destroy the One Ring. In this scene, Saruman summons Gandalf and proposes that they both take possession of the One Ring and use it to destroy Sauron and take his power.

[“And listen carefully, Gandalf, my old friend and helper!” he said, moving towards me and now talking in a smoother voice. “I said we, because it can be us, if you wish to unite to me. A new Power arises. Against it, the old alliances and politics will not help us at all. There is no more hope in the Elves or the agonizing Numenor. So this is a choice before you, before us. We can join such Power. It would be a wise decision, Gandalf. There is hope through such path. His victory is getting closer, and there will be great rewards for those who help him. As long as the Power grows, those who prove themselves to be their friends will also grow: and the wise, like you and me, will patiently come to rule their courses, and control it. We can wait for our time, we can keep what we think within our hearts, perhaps deploring wickedness incidentally done, but approving the final and higher purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we struggle in vain to achieve, more disturbed than helped by our weak and useless friends. There should not be, and there would not be, any changes in our purposes, only in our means.”] (Tolkien, 2001, p. 269)

It is precisely due to the rising power and the perception of the lack of hope that Saruman engenders his betrayal. Symbolism in oneiric level is expressed in Saruman’s dream of Knowledge, Order, and Rule. Evil is being expressed by the desire for the One Ring, specifically in Mordor, with the flirtation in a wise man’s psyche. It is precisely through the dream of a being considered to be wise that Evil settles in. Here is the corruption of the One Ring. Nonetheless, Gandalf refuses, and thus he refuses to reveal the One Ring’s location. He is arrested, and then set free, meeting with the Council of the free peoples.

Thus, a Council of free peoples is formed, having the One Ring present with the Hobbits, especially Frodo Baggins, its carrier, and a retinue is sent in a mission, composed by nine representatives of the free peoples, in order to cross the Middle-Earth, throughout its marvelous kingdoms and dark dangers, and penetrate into Mordor, to secretly reach the furnaces where the One Ring was made, the only place where it could be destroyed.

The second scene shows the retinue following its destiny. In Lorien, the magic land of the Elves, the retinue rests after a long journey. The Lady of Lorien,

Galadriel, is the most ancient creature in the Middle-Earth. A sovereign of great power and knowledge, she is respected and loved by many, and it is in a dialogue between her and Frodo that temptation comes, because Frodo is warned of the weight of his quest and tries to get rid of the One Ring, offering it to Galadriel, in order to be relieved of its burden.

“You are wise and fearless and fair, Lady Galadriel,” said Frodo. “I will give you the One Ring, if you ask for it. It is too great a matter for me.”

[Galadriel laughed, with a sudden and crystal laugh. “Wise Lady Galadriel may be – she said –, but here she found someone that is up to her in courtesy. In a gentle way, you avenged the test I made to your heart at our first meeting.]

“You begin to see with a keen eye. I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp. The evil that was devised long ago works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls. [Would it not be a noble act to be credited to his Ring had I taken it by force or by threatening my guest?”]

“And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!”

[She raised her hand and from the Ring she bore a great light shone that enlightened her only, leaving all else dark. She stood before Frodo and now seemed immeasurably high, and unbearably beautiful, terrible and worthy of worship. Then she let her hand fall, and the light vanished; and suddenly she laughed again and she shrunk: she was a fragile Elf woman, dressed in a simple white gown, whose gentle voice was smooth and sad.]

“I pass the test,” Galadriel said. “I will diminish, and go into the West and remain Galadriel.” (Tolkien, 2001, pp. 381-382)

Here the cosmic symbolism is widely used. Galadriel is so ancient and powerful that her psyche could really change the foundations of the earth, even the use of words connected to the forces of nature (morning, night, sea, sun, snow, mountain, storm, and lightening) reveal the wideness of power Galadriel would have if she had the One Ring. It would no longer be darkness, but an afflicting morning pale-

ness, which would change the very own perception of time and space. At a cosmic level, no one could be more tempted by the One Ring's Evil symbol than Galadriel.

And the journey proceeds, with Galadriel overcoming temptation. The retinue of the One Ring advances to the boundaries of the Elves' world, penetrating the proximities of Men's great kingdoms, and finally being persecuted by Nazguls, Orcs, and Trolls.

And it is precisely in this journey that the third scene is revealed, this time with a member of the very own retinue who pledged to protect the One Ring and its carrier. It is Boromir, captain of the Men's kingdom of Gondor, bordering Mordor, where the battlefield is hard and permanent. This time Boromir tries to steal the One Ring from its carrier, Frodo, with the purpose of using it against Sauron himself.

[“Oh, the Ring”, said Boromir, with sparkling eyes] “The Ring! Is it not a strange fate that we should suffer so much fear and doubt for so small a thing? So small a thing! And I have seen it only for an instant in the house of Elrond. Could I not have sight of it again?”

[Frodo raised his eyes. Suddenly his heart froze. He caught the strange glow in Boromir's eye, although his face still was kind and friendly. “It is better to be kept hidden”, he answered.

“As you wish. I don't care”, said Boromir, “But can't I even speak of it? You seem to be always thinking only of the Ring's power on the hands of the enemy: of its evil uses, and not the good ones. The world is changing, you say. Minas Tirith²¹ will perish if the Ring lasts. But why? It would surely be so if the Ring was with the enemy. But why, if it was with us?”

“Were you not at the Council?”, Frodo replied, “Because we cannot make use of it, and because what we make with it turns into misdeed.

Boromir rose and kept walking hither and thither, impatient.] “So you go on,” he cried. “Gandalf, Elrond – all these folk have taught you to say so. For themselves they may be right. These Elves and half-Elves and Wizards, they would come to grief perhaps. Yet often I doubt if they are wise and not merely shy. [But each one has his own way. Men of honest heart, these will not be corrupted.] We of Minas Tirith have been staunch through long years of trial. We do not desire the power of the Wizard-lords, only strength to defend ourselves, strength in a just cause. And behold! in our hour of need chance brings to light the Ring of Power. It is a gift, I say; a gift to the foes of Mordor. It is mad not to use it, to use the power of the enemy against him. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could

not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!”

[Boromir walked up and down, speaking louder and louder. He almost seemed to have forgotten Frodo, while his speech would linger in walls and weapons, and the gathering of troops of men; he made plans for great alliances and glorious future battles; and destroyed Mordor and became a mighty, benevolent, and wise king”.] (Tolkien, 2001, pp. 416-417)

Finally, after Saruman's knowledge, after Galadriel's land, it is in Men's power of Command that the One Ring presents itself as the symbol of Evil. For Boromir, the victory of using the enemy's weapons against himself is the imposition of his own will against anyone's will. To become a great, powerful and benevolent tyrant is Boromir's aim, through which Evil settles down in his dreams, in his psyche.

Later, Boromir tries to steal the One Ring from Frodo, who manages to escape and abandon the retinue, since the Evil of the One Ring had affected its own members. Boromir repents, and manages to redeem himself, dying when trying to save other retinue Hobbits who were being captured by Orcs.

Thus, the poem and the three demonstrated scenes reflect the three levels of symbolism proposed by Paul Ricoeur: the poetic, the oneiric, and the cosmic. For the poem, the One Ring's own identity is established, as the conceptualization of this symbolic level states. In the three scenes, the oneiric, as a psychic reverie, is shown in Saruman and Boromir's temptation and fall into evil. And the cosmic is revealed in Galadriel, in the changing of the earth's foundations by her own will.

4. The redemption of Evil

Paul Ricoeur's proposal is to understand literature as a language of confession that allows a re-staging of the Evil's act, in order to start a reflection, a speculation, about its symbols and myths. For such, it is also necessary to found such reflection in philosophy's own conception. Plato and mostly Saint Augustine gave philosophy's necessary systematics, with the concepts of justice, free will and iniancy, to understand the literature of *The Lord of the Rings*.

J. R. R. Tolkien, an academician in Philology, Linguistics, and Literature, conceives a literary work that integrates his historical moment of reaction to modernity, of discussion on industrialization and its changes upon nature, on Nation-State with its command over

men and modern science and its technical-instrumental character. All that with a clear symbolic object in the narrative: the One Ring.

The craving for eternity, which Tolkien evaluates as the basis of his work, appears here. In his sub-creation of a secondary world with secondary beliefs, he ascribes to the First Creator every response to afflictions. Writing to a diversified audience, from all religions and philosophies, Tolkien instigates ethics and aesthetics as a way of expressing the great truth of the Augustinian philosophy: God is the only reality where we can find true peace, beauty, and love. And this God reveals himself from the simplest values, such as friendship, honor, and respect.

To understand the One Ring as a symbol of Evil is to enable oneself to live in the simplicity of work and in fraternal and familiar company, like the Hobbits and the Dwarves, and to live the honor of choices of sacrifice and donation, like the kings of Gondor, and to live wisdom in a simple and natural way, like the Elves and the Wizards. In a 1956 letter, Tolkien shows us his precise conscience, intuitive or not, about Ricoeur's explanations and also of Saint Augustine's view.

"Lead us not into temptation etc" is the harder and the less often considered petition. The view, in the terms of my story, is that though every event or situation has (at least) two aspects: the history and development of the individual (it is something out of which he can get good, ultimate good, for himself, or fail to do so), and the history of the world (which depends on his action for its own sake) – still there are abnormal situations in which one may be placed. "Sacrificial" situations, I should call them: sc. positions in which the "good" of the world depends on the behavior of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal – even, it may happen (or seem, humanely speaking), demand a strength of body and mind which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his "will"; that is against any choice he could make or would make unfettered, not under the duress. (Tolkien, 2006, p. 224)

Thus, the choices before the One Ring are always sacrificial situations. Actually, the symbol of the One Ring as Evil is precisely the insertion into the narrative of those sacrificial situations that each individual must accomplish when facing what Tolkien discerned in modernity. Only in the perception of God can one find the strength for such accomplishments. In a 1956 letter in answer to a literary critic, Tolkien declares

In The Lord of the Rings the conflict is not basically about "freedom", though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honor. The

Eldars and the Numenoreans²² believed in The One, the true God, and held the worship of any other persons an abomination.

Sauron desired to be a God-King, and was held to be this by his servants; if he had been victorious he would have demanded divine honor from all rational creatures and absolute temporal power over the whole world. (Tolkien, 2006, pp. 233-234)

Finally, Tolkien sought redemption for all the Evil he saw in his history. A child of the English imperialism, soldier in the World War I, war correspondent in World War II, father of a priest, a soldier, and an academician, J. R. R. Tolkien found in literature a balm for reflection and statement of truths and beliefs that he tried to live. Researcher of the truth, he found in a remote past as a researcher of the Middle Ages, the eternity that surpassed the instantaneousness of his time.

[Yet the beauty of righteousness is so great, so great is the enchantment of eternal light, that is, of incommutable Truth and Wisdom, that even if it were not allowed to remain in it more than the space of a day, only for this the innumerable years of this life would be rightfully and deservedly despised, even if full of delights and superabundance of temporal goods. As a matter of fact, the psalmist did not baselessly say, or with little affection: for one sole day at your atrium is worth more than thousands. Although this could be understood in another sense, referring the thousands of days to time mutability, and designating for the appealing day the immutability of eternity".] (Augustine, 1986, p. 266)

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Version by Carlos Manuel Miranda Leite da Silva

Notes

- * Attending the Master's Course in Sciences of Religion – PUC/SP. Email: dklautau@yahoo.com.br
- ¹ The One Ring is the basic point in the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. Secretly forged by the Maiar, a race of angelic status, Sauron, who had been corrupted, had the power of controlling the other rings of power, forged by the Elves guided by Celebrimbor, but oriented by Sauron, by the time he acted as an ally, and offered to the free peoples of the Middle-Earth: Elves, Dwarves and Men. With this trap, Sauron intended to dominate all the existing men, lands, and knowledge.
- ² Aurelius Augustine (from the Latin *Aurelius Augustinus*), Augustine of Hippo or Saint Augustine, was a Catholic bishop, theologian, and philosopher born on November 13, 354, in Tagaste (now Souk-Ahras, Algeria); he died on August 28, 430, in Hipona (now Annaba, Algeria). Catholics consider him a saint and a doctor of the Church's doctrine.
- ³ Paul Ricoeur (born in Valence, on February 27, 1913 – and dead in Chatenay Malabry, near Paris, on May 20, 2005) was one of the great French philosophers and thinkers of the period following the World War II. He was an academic at the University of Sorbonne in the after-war. He also worked at the universities of Louvain (Belgium) and Yale (USA), where he produced an important work on Political Philosophy. Ricoeur participated in debates on Linguistics, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism, and Hermeneutics, with a particular interest in the sacred texts of Christianity.
- ⁴ A basic category in Sciences of Religion, the term *sacred* is full of controversies, and Ricoeur's interpretation is not the only one. For an introduction to the polemics see CROATTO, José Severino. *As linguagens da experiência religiosa*. São Paulo, Paulinas, 2004.
- ⁵ Hermeneutics is a branch of Philosophy that deals with the human comprehension and interpretation of written texts. The word derives from the name of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods, to whom the Greeks ascribed the origin of language and writing and considered the patron of communication and human understanding. Philosophers Friedrich Schleiermacher (1756-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) are considered to be the modern organizers of Hermeneutics.
- ⁶ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on January, 1892 – dead in Bornemouth, September 2, 1973) was the creator of *The Hobbit* and its sequel *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien was an Anglo-Saxon language professor (considered one of the major experts on the subject) at Oxford, from 1925 to 1945, and English and Literature professor at the same university from 1945 to 1959.
- ⁷ Tolkien's most divulged academic study is his analysis of *Beowulf*, an epic poem with around 3,000 verses, dated from the 8th century, which tells the story of the warrior that faces the monster Grendel, as a struggle between Good and Evil, and reflects the ideals of the Anglo-Saxon society from that period, in a dialogue between Christianity and the pagan mythology.
- ⁸ The race that gives title to the book, the Hobbits from Middle-Earth, were much alike humans, yet measuring around 1 meter to 1.40 meter. Hobbits were peaceful and lived basically from agriculture and commerce. Like the various races from Middle-Earth, they had their own calendar, registers, and genealogical trees. There is no register of languages of their own, but they were capable of learning several languages.
- ⁹ This book is the origin of *The Silmarillion*, a book only posthumously published, which presents great part of the cosmogony and the epic wars that are the basis for *The Lord of the Rings'* narrative.
- ¹⁰ Middle-Earth's religion is not explicit in the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, since for Tolkien, this was an introductory work to his more complex creation. The creation of the world, divinity, the emanations of power, the corruptions, the tragedies, the great adventures that form Tolkien's universe, in which *The Lord of the Rings* is just the tip of the iceberg, can be discovered in the books *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*.
- ¹¹ Middle-Earth's calendars are precise. Those registers come from the kingdom of Gondor, which, on its turn, update their sources from the Elves' registers, who came from the West to the Middle-Earth in the Second Era. At *The Lord of the Rings'* appendixes there are explanations for the calendars.
- ¹² Plato of Athens, 428/427 b.C. – 347 b.C., Greek philosopher; disciple of Socrates, founder of the Academy and master of Aristotle. His real name was Aristocle; Plato was a nickname that, probably, made reference to his physical characteristic, such as the athletic air or the large shoulders, or still his vast intellectual capacity in dealing with various themes. Πλάτος (*plátos*), in Greek, means amplitude, dimension, wideness. His philosophy has great importance and influence. Plato dedicated hi-

mself to several themes, among them Ethics, Politics, Metaphysics, and the Theory of Knowledge.

- ¹³ Following the narrative, Gollum is actually a kind of Hobbit that, due to the continuous use of the One Ring, has his nature completely disfigured. There is such pattern in *The Lord of the Rings*: evil is not a creator, but a corruptor. All those enslaved by the One Ring become like shadows of what they once were, and use the servitude of the One Ring as a power to oppress and control those who still keep their freedom.
- ¹⁴ T.N.: This excerpt is a free version directly from the Portuguese language version, since we were not able to access the original English version. Whenever such situation happens we will use the signs [] to enclose the free version with words of our choice.
- ¹⁵ At this moment, prior to Vatican Council II (1962-1985), which updated its action, the Catholic Church still strongly opposes the so-called modernism, with encyclicals condemning the bases upon which such reality was built. By modernity is meant a world vision initiated in the 17th century's rationalism, going through the 18th century's Enlightenment, the 19th century's political-scientific definitions, and their concretization in the 20th century. In its synthesis we understand Capitalism, Nation-State, and *Modern Science*. For a more thorough analysis on Tolkien's critique of modernity see CURRY, Patrick. *Defending Middle-Earth – Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*. London. Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.
- ¹⁶ To see the theses against modernist doctrines in the Catholic vision, see the encyclical of Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, of 1907.
- ¹⁷ In the lecture *On Fairy-Stories*, pronounced at the St. Andrews University, on March 8, 1939, published in the book *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, Tolkien defines the sub-creation as a workmanship that allows the investigation of a Secondary World, which produces a Secondary Belief that must follow the truth of the Primary Creation and World. Such truth, for Tolkien, is in the Augustinian philosophy.
- ¹⁸ According to professor Antônio Soares Pinheiro, who translated directly from Latin to Portuguese the researched edition of *The Free will*: "Iniancy derives from the Latin verb *inhiare*, also used by Augustine, which means to expect or eagerly desire. It expresses any of the sensitive impulsivities, generally distempered, towards its object, that is, what is commonly denominated as passions. Here and in other places he translates *cupiditas*, to which neither cupidity nor greediness precisely apply, although these terms derive etymologically from such word. In some passages, however, he translates it as libido (lust), when this Latin word keeps the primitive and generic sense of sensitive impulsivity".
- ¹⁹ Thus we understand the criticizing relation Tolkien demonstrates regarding modernity. To cling to money as a fundamental structure of the human relation, to the power of the Nation-State as the political definer in detriment of the community, and to the utilitarian technicism that dissociates knowledge and being are the main temptations the symbol of the One Ring presents in the narrative.
- ²⁰ Such concept expressed in reference to the symbol of evil is only partially understood in mythical level, since it supposes the contradiction between free will and free servitude. Thus, Ricoeur differentiates the servile will of man's fallibility, being the servile will a true corruption of the free will and the original fallibility not inherent to man himself.
- ²¹ Called the White City, it is the capital of the kingdom of Gondor, main fortress against Mordor's armies.
- ²² Elves and Men of Gondor.